

Inside Avatar

The stars of **Avatar** discuss their experience working on James Cameron's sci-fi epic.



**Sam
Worthington**
(Jake Sully)

Q&A

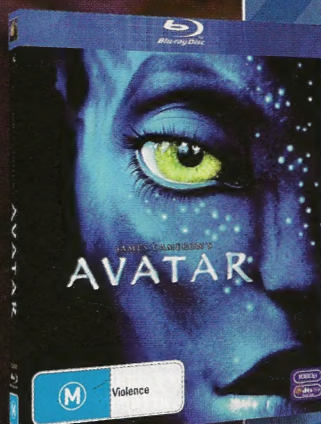
Can you discuss working with the new technology pioneered on this film?

"We were working with the most advanced technology ever used on a movie set, but basically when we were filming it was all quite rudimentary, because it is always about you as an actor and the other person with you. I found it very liberating to be honest. You have your Velcro wetsuit and helmet and you are stuck in a world where there is nothing. If acting is truth in imaginary circumstance, in this case you have to get absolute truth in absolute imaginary circumstances. It's liberating because the only tangible thing is the other actor and you are asking: what do I want from them? So it is like a stage production."

How do you deal with the specific challenges of reacting when nothing is there?

"Jim is very good because you never really act with nothing, if there are vines

we have to swing from, they'll build vines for us and we run and jump and swing from them. They build the terrain. Jim's very clever at giving you something tactile to react off so instead of saying: 'there's a bird flying over there, have a look at it Sam,' he'll throw something in the air, or if there's an explosion he throws debris and foam at you. It is like being kids building a fort or running around with boxes on their heads, pretending that they are robots, it's great, like being in a fun park. If I am flying on a big banshee, they build a banshee rig and get six guys to move it really quickly along the flight plan and then I am riding the damn thing. It is all about problem solving, how do we figure out how to come down a slide and down a muddy embankment? What we do is to build the muddy embankment and slide down it on the soundstage. Then when you look at it on the monitor, it looks like blue creatures sliding through the mud in the jungle and it works."



Can you discuss the love story that is central to the film?

"The first time Jake Sully sees the Na'vi woman, Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) he falls in love with her. She pushes him, she doesn't let him relax and a woman with balls like that is a typical Jim Cameron type of female role. A guy like me definitely falls head over heels for her. That's the relationship, he's continually being pushed and pressured by her to step up and be a better man, a better person. Zoe is very beautiful and the love scenes were not that hard for me. She is great and this is a movie that shows no matter what you look like, even if you are blue and 10 feet tall, it is your heart that matters. It also shows that we should respect other cultures. In this story we're the odd ones out who see the world differently. The Na'vi's way of thinking is very romantic and very spiritual and I really dig that."



You've achieved international success very rapidly although you've been working in Australia for years. How did you actually become an actor? Was it a dream when you were growing up?

"Not at all, nobody dreamed of acting or movies where I came from. Where I grew up mate, you barely had a movie house or a video store, let alone thinking you would ever have your head on a poster, so I didn't even go there, my dream was to get out of town. I was a bricklayer; I built houses and the acting all came about because of a girlfriend. I was 19 and met a girl who wanted to go to the premier drama school in Australia, NIDA, where Mel Gibson, Cate Blanchett and many others went. She had an audition and I auditioned with her for moral support, to cheer her on. I just made my way through it in my own way and they said 'keep going, keep going', then eventually they said: 'would you like to come and spend three years here?' I got in she didn't and that was it, she dumped me a week later. (laughs)."



Zoe Saldana

(Neytiri)

Q&A

What kind of training did you do?

"We did archery and movement. We worked with an amazing choreographer from Cirque du Soleil to create a specific walk and mannerisms for the Na'vi, for this species, because we just couldn't be human. We also did martial arts: Wushu, which is a very specific form of martial arts. It is the kind

practiced by Jet Li, rather than Jackie Chan. Because of who we are, the movement needed to be smooth. We also worked on horseback and there was a lot of training in the gym, so that we could sustain rigorous legwork. It was important because I am crouching for half the movie."

Your character has a tail; did you actually wear a tail while acting?

"We would have to wear the tail throughout all our movement training, in order to allow the tail to dictate how we were going to swing and move. We had to understand the creatures and their bodies because they are much thinner and longer than us and they have specific movements that we would not be able to do normally. We had to make the entire anatomy look realistic. Probably fifty percent of people won't realise any of this when they are watching the movie, but the other fifty percent, who are scientific and meticulous may appreciate that the anatomy and movements are realistic. Together with Jim, we all loved working on those physical aspects of the characters."

How much training and exercise do you do now; you look fantastically slim and fit?

"I've been working non stop for the last three years so I've been training off and on but not consistently. I recently filmed *The Losers*, an action film, in Puerto Rico. We were shooting for three months. Because there was lots of action and a lot of gun work, I had to be very fit. But I'm a physical person, my mind never stops so I can only calm it down by exhausting myself, I am always very active."

How much do you enjoy action?

"I like action a lot. I've always loved actresses like Linda Hamilton, Sigourney Weaver, Angelina Jolie, Jessica Biel and Jennifer Lopez. I think she has such a beautiful body, she's very much in tune with her body, she has a rhythmic movement that is really lovely, she's a dancer. I love being physical, I think it's so empowering when a woman uses her body to tell stories, not only as a sexual tool or a maternal tool – but as a powerful fighting tool. It is using the body as a 'save your ass tool'. I love that kind of character who is strong, as opposed to a victim who sits back going 'aaagh my Romeo I love you.'"



BLUE MOVIE

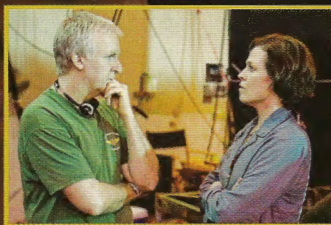
How James Cameron created a fictional world that has changed the real one we live in.

I'm the king of the world!"

declared director James Cameron at the 70th Annual Academy Awards ceremony in 1998, after his beloved movie *Titanic* blitzed the competition to win 11 Oscars and went on to become the highest grossing movie of all time at the worldwide box office.

Cameron wasn't so lucky at the recent 2010 ceremony; his 3-D science fiction blockbuster *Avatar* was up for 9 awards including the coveted Best Picture and Director trophy, but only received three Oscars in the technical categories it was always going to win – Cinematography, Art Direction and Visual Effects.

Cameron may no longer be king of the world but *Avatar* reigns supreme, having dethroned *Titanic* as the planet's biggest movie moneymaker ever – in Australia it has almost doubled that film's \$57 million record at the time



IMAX theatre.

Avatar has not only been a financial success story but has also left an indelible imprint on popular culture and the public consciousness. There have been the inevitable spoofs, political cartoons and porno version (reportedly called 'Ave-it-ard'!), but the film's colossal impact has been even farther reaching. Websites have sprung up offering online counselling and support groups for those suffering the, er, blues after a trip to Pandora at the movies. Why would *Avatar* leave you depressed, you might well ask? Well, apparently some have been unable to cope with

"the dream of Pandora being intangible" and can't handle the crash back to earth once the film is over. Perhaps it's these sad souls that need to get real. The latest trend is 'Avatising', in other words turning celebrities into Na'vi via some clever Photoshopping (Amy Winehouse being an inspired choice). Then there are the role-play groups who paint themselves blue and get back to nature. Moreover, the Na'vi language has become the new Klingon and Elvish, with many eager to learn how to speak the alien tongue.

Cameron's epic has also stirred up controversy

L.A.R.P. – Live Avatar Role Playing



THE VISUAL FX (R)EVOLUTION



KING KONG (1933)

Willis O'Brien dazzled audiences with his pioneering stop motion and glass shot techniques.



JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS (1963)

Ray Harryhausen upgraded and fine tunes O'Brien's work with the miracle of "Dynamation".



2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968)

Kubrick rejected traditional blue screen effects, opting for a clearer negative. The results spoke for themselves.



STAR WARS (1977)

John Dykstra's revolutionary motion control camera freed up previously locked-off effects shots.



THE ABYSS (1989)

ILM's computer generated water tentacle opened the floodgates for the shape of things to come.

for its environmental message; right wing media commentators labelling it a blatant bit of greenie propaganda. Sigourney Weaver's smoking has also ignited debate, and of course the Vatican has added further fuel to the anti-*Avatar* fire by



frowning upon the film's theme of worshipping nature over religion. There have even been allegations of racism (!), but if it's to be accused of anything, then *Avatar* is 'anti-human'. The movie can even be hazardous to your health; a Taiwanese man died from a stroke triggered by over-excitement during a screening, and some viewers have reported nausea, headaches and epileptic seizures induced by the film's visual stimuli and rapidly edited action sequences.

Then came the inevitable 'style over substance' grumblings from film critics and detractors. While the story itself may indeed be what *South Park*'s Cartman would call "a bunch of tree-hugging hippy crap", and the socio-political message is about as subtle as the one at the heart of Neill Blomkamp's recent *District 9*, there's no denying the struggle between the Na'vi and the sky people struck a resonant emotional chord with every conceivable human demographic. Just like *Titanic*, this was a movie for mums and dads, kids and grandparents.

Comparisons with *Pocahontas* and *Dances with Wolves* are unavoidable but *Avatar*'s closest sci-fi relative is in fact Frank Herbert's *Dune*, in which a planet is exploited for a valuable natural resource and an offworlder ultimately becomes a hero and leader of the native people, taming a

legendary beast which he rides into battle against his own race. There's more than a nod to Cameron's own *Aliens*, too, not only in Sigourney Weaver's tough character but in the design of the AMP combat suits (powerloaders anyone?), presence of an evil company man (Giovanni Ribisi) and a fetish for military hardware.

Most important perhaps is *Avatar*'s impact on the future of filmmaking. Cameron began his script treatment for the film back in 1994, but production wouldn't commence until technology was sufficiently advanced to accommodate the visual effects and three-dimensional photography demands required to fully realise his ambitious vision. In the interim Cameron dabbled with the 3-D process on a pair of IMAX documentaries, *Ghosts of the Abyss* and *Aliens of the Deep*, refining the process and promising that *Avatar* would be far removed from the unfocused 3-D of the 1950s and '80s, and would transport the audience into another world.

Avatar delivered on Cameron's promise, eschewing the traditional 'comin' at ya' gimmick for a more immersive 3-D movie experience of incredible depth and clarity. Seeds from the sacred tree drifted into the cinema, the audience became part of the crowd scenes and flew on the back of a banshee. The film's technical triumph has already resulted in a 3-D boom with every other event movie now boasting an extra dimension – and there's more to come, including 3-D TV sets in our very own homes.

3-D element aside, *Avatar* has also taken CGI



(Above) The AMP from *Avatar*
(Below) The Power Loader from *Aliens*



and photorealism to the next level, particularly in advancements to the motion capture system used to create 'virtual' characters like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. It comes as no surprise then that New Zealand FX company Weta Digital are among the effects wizards behind *Avatar*'s groundbreaking look.

One of the most anticipated films of the last decade, Cameron

gave industry insiders and media a sneak peek at 20 minutes of footage in August 2009, an event that became known as 'Avatar Day'. Reaction was mixed, with some describing what they saw as "cuts from Halo". Indeed, early trailers resembled a video game and the skeptical questioned whether the film would return on its mega-budget, reported to be in the vicinity of USD\$237 million. The film opened worldwide mid December 2009, the rest is history.

Now *Avatar* is ours to own on DVD, and it will put the blue into Blu-ray. Every home should have one, and although a 3-D version is still some time away it's a credit to Cameron's achievements that the film remains an effective, involving and impressive experience in its 2-D alternative, allowing for closer scrutiny of the incredible FX work and the creation of a believable alien culture. Given Cameron's past penchant for longer cuts of his films on video (*Aliens*, *The Abyss*, *T2*), it's possible that an extended version of *Avatar* could one-day surface. The director has already confirmed a deleted Na'vi sex scene – in which Jake and Neytiri join braids – could be restored for a future release. Watch this space.

Avatar is available on DVD and Blu-ray on April 29.



TERMINATOR 2 (1991)

James Cameron pushed the CGI boundaries to their next logical level with his liquid metal T-1000.



JURASSIC PARK (1993)

Blending ILM's computer wizardry with Stan Winston's animatronics meant that suddenly, nothing was impossible.



STAR WARS EP II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES (2002)

FX overload! The first completely digital, live action motion picture. Where to from here?



THE LORD OF THE RINGS (2001-2003)

Advancement in Motion Capture technology created believable, photorealistic characters. Jar Jar who?



AVATAR (2009)

FX pioneer James Cameron revolutionises Motion Capture and 3-D cinematography in one massive movie.

